

Merritt Parkway, (West Branch) Byram River Bridge
Spanning the west branch of the Byram River at the
1.83 mile mark on the Merritt Parkway
Greenwich
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-64

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Merritt Parkway, (West Branch) Byram River Bridge

HAER No. CT-64

Location: Spanning the west branch of the Byram River at the 1.63 mile mark on the Merritt Parkway in Greenwich, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: 18.611260.4545920
Quad: Glenville, Connecticut

Construction Date: November 1934

Engineer: Connecticut Highway Department

Architect: George L. Dunkelberger, of the Connecticut Highway Department, acted as head architect for all Merritt Parkway bridges.

Contractor: Lee Construction Company
Boston, Massachusetts

Present Owner: Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut

Present Use: Used by traffic on the Merritt Parkway to cross the west branch of the Byram River

Significance: The bridges of the Merritt Parkway were predominately inspired by the Art Deco and Art Moderne architectural styles of the 1930s. Experimental forming techniques were employed to create the ornamental characteristics of the bridges. This, combined with the philosophy of incorporating architecture into bridge design and the individuality of each structure, makes them distinctive.

Historians: Todd Thibodeau, HABS/HAER Historian
Corinne Smith, HAER Engineer
August 1992

For more detailed information on the Merritt Parkway, refer to the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63.

LOCAL HISTORY

In July 1640, Daniel Patrick and Robert Feake, as agents of the New Haven Colony, purchased all lands between the Assmick and Potommuck brooks from local Indians. To protect their settlement Patrick and Feake signed allegiance to the Dutch at New Amsterdam, in 1642. Two years later, the Dutch raised a 130-man army and defeated the Petuquapean Indians at the site of the present village of Cos Cob in Greenwich.¹

In 1650, a treaty was signed that defined the boundary line between Connecticut and New Amsterdam, removing Greenwich from Dutch control. Six years later, Greenwich again came under the jurisdiction of the New Haven Colony and started to prosper. In the next century, farmers settled throughout the almost fifty square miles of Greenwich. By 1756, there were nine districts in the town: Greenwich, Old Town, Horseneck, Cos Cob, North Street, Pecksland, Round Hill, Quaker Ridge, Stanwich, and Glenville. Trade with New York City prospered as ports developed at Cos Cob and the mouth of the Mianus River. The shoe-making industry developed at Banksville and Stanwich.²

With the arrival of the railroad in 1848, Greenwich commenced to change. The train reduced the time required to get to New York City. The town flourished as more and more New Yorkers traveled to Connecticut, seeking a haven from the noise and pollution of the city. By the 1920s, Greenwich was a well-established commuter suburb.³

¹"Development of Old Greenwich." Greenwich Press, 17 October 1935, p. 27.

²William E. Finch, "Greenwich--The History of a Border Town," (Manuscript, Greenwich Public Library Vertical File), 1-2.

³Finch, 6.

As farms gave way to residential homes, traffic continued to increase on the Post Road/U.S. Route 1. Local residents soon sought an alternative to the dangerous old highway. When Commissioner Macdonald suggested building an alternative road, Greenwich's residents quickly adhered to the idea. But conflicts developed as it came time to determine a specific route.

Originally eight different plans were put forth. This eventually became a contest between two routes. Macdonald wanted a northern route going through Round Hill, North Street, and Stanwich (this become known as the Greenwich Loop). Local residents, including Highway Superintendent P. L. Minor, wanted a more southerly route through Pecksland. They felt this route would be more convenient, less expensive to build and necessary in the near future. Furthermore, local leaders preferred destroying the lower valued properties along the Pecksland route than disrupting wealthy estates to the north. Macdonald threatened to start construction at the east end of the parkway to gain support for his plan. With this obstacle out of the way, work began at the New York state line on June 1, 1934.⁴

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

Originating in northern Greenwich, the west branch of the Byram River meanders through several golf courses, a nature conservancy, and under the Merritt Parkway before merging with the main branch of the Byram River. During the construction of the Merritt, the west branch of the Byram River was redirected to create Toll Gate Pond.

⁴"Macdonald Sees No Road Solution," Greenwich Press, 10 September 1931, p. 1.

"Highway Superintendent Minor Proposes Southern Route," Greenwich Press, 10 March 1932, p. 1.

"Proposed Routes For the Merritt Highway," Greenwich Press, 10 March 1932, p. 8.

"Route Goes Through Round Hill, Residents Upset," Greenwich Press, 24 March 1932, p. 1.

"400 Hear Cross and Macdonald Discuss Highway," Greenwich Press, 16 November 1933, p.

The Peter Mitchell Construction Company of Greenwich, CT, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from the New York state line to Round Hill Road, in Greenwich (ConnDot project #180-13). While the bridge over the west branch of Byram River is located within this section of the Merritt, the bridge contract went to the Lee Construction Company of Boston, MA (ConnDot project #180-11).⁵ The bridge cost \$12,900 and was under construction from May 24, 1934 until fall 1934, making it the first bridge completed on the Merritt Parkway.⁶ The paving work for this region of the Merritt also extended from the state line to Round Hill Road. This contract was awarded to the A. I. Savin Company of East Hartford, CT (ConnDot project #180-90).

To save money the bridge was built narrower than the roadway, although this created a hazard for motorists. From October 1955 to July 1956, three steel beams were added to the north side of the bridge so the width of the structure matched the roadway. The concrete balustrade on the north side of the overpass was replaced at this time. Since then the bridge has received little maintenance.⁷

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Byram River Bridge is a single-span reinforced-concrete bridge comprising nine T-beams spanning 30'. Spaced at 7'-3" on center, each beam stem is 24" wide by 20-3/4" deep plus a 7-1/2"-thick slab. The beams bear on a ledge on the concrete abutment wall that is formed integrally with the parallel wing walls. A 1/2"-thick pre-molded expansion joint is placed between the end of the

⁵Contract Card File, Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Wethersfield, CT.

⁶(West Branch) Byram River Bridge, DOT #691; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

⁷Byram River Bridge, DOT #691; Bridge Maintenance File.

beam and the wall. A tar-paper joint is placed between the wall and an extension of the railing past the beam span. The railing on the south side is a concrete balustrade similar to that shown in the construction documents, and the railing on the north side is a concrete parapet with a steel rail. Three steel beams on the north side of the bridge, added to widen the road, are supported on a ledge of an additional length of abutment wall.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hurd, D. Hamilton. History of Fairfield County, Connecticut. Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis and Company, 1881.

Finch, William E. "Greenwich--The History of a Border Town." Manuscript, Greenwich Public Library Vertical File.

Greenwich Press. 1931-1935.

———. Contract Card File. Map File and Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Wethersfield, CT. This includes construction drawings, copies of which are in the HAER field records.

———. Bridge Maintenance File. Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

PROJECT INFORMATION

This recording project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division of the National Park Service, Robert J. Kapsch, Chief. The Merritt Parkway recording project was sponsored and funded by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDot) and the Federal Highway Administration.

The fieldwork, measured drawings, historical reports and photographs were prepared under the general direction of Eric N. DeLony, HAER Chief, and Sara Amy Leach, HABS Historian.

The recording team consisted of Jacqueline A. Salame (Columbia University), architect and field supervisor; Mary Elizabeth Clark (Pratt Institute) and B. Devon Perkins (Yale University), architectural technicians; Joanne McAllister-Hewlings (US/ICOMOS-Great Britain, University of Sheffield), landscape architect; Corinne Smith (Cornell University), engineer; Gabrielle M. Esperdy (City University of New York) and Todd Thibodeau (Arizona State University), historians; and Jet Lowe, HAER photographer.